

Spiritual Unity in the Body of Christ

Talk 1: Charismatic Leaders Fellowship, Virginia Beach, February 28, 2012

I begin with a question. Do you sense a tension between the word “spiritual” and the word “Body”? Do we think of the spiritual realm as something above and in tension with bodily realities? The difference between the chapel or worship area and the bathroom?

I begin here because the history of Christianity has been bedeviled by this tension. It lies behind the opposition between the Protestant assertion of the “invisible church” of all true believers known to God alone and the Catholic insistence on visible communion in one body under one authority.

But we all believe in the Incarnation of the Son of God. We believe that God is Spirit. We believe that the Word became flesh, that “He was manifested in the flesh” (1 Tim. 3: 16), or as it is expressed in Hebrews 10: 5: “Consequently, when Christ came into the world, he said, ‘Sacrifices and offerings thou hast not desired, but a body hast Thou prepared for me.’”

At the heart of our shared faith is the salvific death and resurrection of Jesus. He could die because he took on a human body with all that this implies. In fact, the apostle Paul uses this extraordinary phrase “he became sin” (2 Cor. 5: 21). Sin divides, sin destroys. So the humanity of Jesus was torn apart on the cross, and became divided in death. But in his resurrection, there is victory over death, and so Paul can say of the risen - ascended Jesus; “in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily” (Col. 2: 9).

It is in 1 Corinthians that Paul treats in particular detail of the Church as the body of Christ, of the functioning of the one body and also of the resurrection with the transformation of the physical body into the spiritual body. So I want to go through some points from 1 Corinthians:

In Chapter 1, we read of divisions in the church of Corinth. Paul writes: “I appeal to you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree that there be no dissensions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment.” (1 Cor. 1: 10).

In Chapter 3, “For while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh? And behaving like ordinary men (lit. in a merely human manner *kata anthrōpon*)?” (1 Cor. 3: 3).

In Chapter 6, Paul addresses the problem of those who only see the body as an adjunct to the real person and who justify sexual immorality by saying that bodily activities do not touch the spirit. So Paul writes, “The body is not meant for immorality, but for the Lord” and then he adds this astonishing statement, “and the Lord for the body”. (1 Cor. 6: 13). “Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God? You are not your own; you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.” (1 Cor. 6: 19 - 20).

In chapter 10, Paul speaks about the eucharist, the supper of the Lord. “The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread (*artos*), we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread (*ek tou enos artou*).” (1 Cor. 10: 16 - 17). It appears that this is how Paul comes to describe the church

community as the body of Christ. We eat the one body, and thereby become one body. Because we eat the body of Christ, we become the body of Christ.

This then prepares the way for Chapter 12 with an extended treatment of charisms and the body. “For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ.” (1 Cor. 12: 12). There follows the passage speaking of the need of all the members and limbs of the body to function within the body and that no member or limb is sufficient unto itself. One cannot say to another “I have no need of you”.

Here we see the Church as an organic and visible unity, in which inner harmony is to produce harmonious action of the body. The unity of the Church is both visible and invisible, because the Spirit that gives us life and that is at work within us is not visible, or is visible only through the effects. But we who receive the Spirit are visible, and whether or not we are united with others is visible.

Now we come to 1 Corinthians 15. The resurrection of the dead is the resurrection of the body, but Paul describes the resurrected body as a “spiritual body” (*soma pneumatikon*). “It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body.” (1 Cor. 15: 44). In fact “physical” is not the best translation: the Greek is *soma psychikon*, which can be translated a natural body. It does not mean that the resurrected body is not really a body, a material reality. It means it is totally transformed from within by the Spirit of God, glorified. Just as I cited from Col. 2: 9, the fullness of the godhead dwells in Jesus bodily.

I suggest that just as the glorified body of the resurrection is called a “spiritual body” but is truly a body, transformed from the old physical body from the conditions of this life, so the unity of the Church is spiritual, but it is still a human society, a visible human gathering. The unity of the Church is spiritual because it is formed by the Holy Spirit. But the unity of the Church or its disunity is visible, because a body is visible, because the functioning of a body in the world is visible, whether a body is a coordinated systemic unity or a dysfunctional uncoordinated basket case, that is also visible.

The Impact of the Charismatic Movement

I want to move now to the significance of the Pentecostal and charismatic movements for Christian unity. Here I take it that we all agree that in these movements there is an outpouring of the Holy Spirit from above that is profoundly transforming and life-giving. This work of God has most commonly been known as baptism in/with the Holy Spirit.

When people are baptized in the Holy Spirit, they immediately recognize a spiritual affinity with others baptized in the Spirit. We find that we can recognize the Spirit of the Lord in their testimonies and the Word of God in their teaching. We can pray together in profound harmony. We can pray and sing in tongues together. We are blessed when they minister to us.

So when the charismatic movement reached the Catholic Church in 1967 - significantly after the completion of the Second Vatican Council, very soon after - it was a huge joy for Catholics and Protestants to find that for the first time they were part of the same tide of the Spirit and able to experience a real communion in the Holy Spirit with each other. In the early years of the Renewal movement among Catholics, there were many conferences attended by growing numbers of Catholic people who had never imagined praying and worshipping with Protestants - and there were always Protestant Bible teachers whose teaching was highly valued. I remembering my astonished wonderment at this phenomenon. It was an amazing work of God.

I want to reflect on this shared experience and ask why it has not borne more fruit in mutual reconciliation. For myself, I knew that this was an immense impulse for unity. I knew that it was real, that it was a work of the Holy Spirit acting on our human spirits. I never believed that this grace by itself removed all the obstacles to reconciliation that we have inherited from the battles and quarrels of the past. I understood that we had been given a unity, a communion, at the level of the spirit, and that this was a springboard for the necessary task of achieving unity at the level of mind, that is of articulated faith, and unity at the level of embodied community, i. e. church. It was a powerful impulse adding deeper motivation to the quest for unity. As one already deeply committed to the work for unity in the ecumenical movement, I saw that this grace was something that the ecumenical movement badly needed.

As you know, some of those baptized in the Spirit believed that this was the authentic unity of the Holy Spirit, and that all those so blessed should form church, by abandoning their past and leaving their previous commitments and affiliations. Many who adopted a Restorationist vision spoke of restoring the New Testament Church, for which in their view the existing churches and denominations were irrelevant. For me, this was never an option. I saw the by-passing of history in this way, the idea that you could simply dismiss all those centuries of Christianity and just go back to the Bible as a cul-de-sac, as an evasion of the hard work of repentance, purification, and renewal.

But on the Catholic side, the charismatic movement was not taken seriously by most ecumenists. It tended to be dismissed as mere emotionalism, not an authentic unity of any kind if it was even seriously considered. There were a few exceptions like the great theologian of the Church, Yves Congar who in his last major writing, 3 volumes on the Holy Spirit has a whole section on charismatic renewal that is quite sympathetic. But one cannot just blame the ecumenists. The charismatic Catholics did not seriously examine or reflect deeply on this charismatic unity in the Spirit. This was partly because they were more focused on getting accepted by church authority and focusing on this spiritual unity with charismatic Protestants would not help gain that acceptance.

So in preparation for the Holy Spirit conference at New Orleans in 1987, I wrote a book entitled *One Lord One Spirit One Body*, with the sub-title "Ecumenical Grace of the Charismatic Movement". It was translated into French, German and Dutch in that order. In these nations it came under much greater theological scrutiny than in any English-speaking nation. I was accused by some of promoting an "überkonfessionnelle Kirche", that is a Church above the actual Churches of history. This is not what I was proposing. I was trying to articulate for the first time what I had experienced, namely that this new unity in the Spirit experienced by all those baptized in the Holy Spirit had been given the grace of a real and initial unity at the level of spirit - not in an imaginary or substitute church above history, but as a powerful impulse for unity right where we were in the middle of our divided Churches. It was therefore a grace from God to build upon as with a new motivation and a new love for each other, we could begin to address the issues that have divided us. I described the two opposed attitudes that prevent this grace bearing its fruit for unity as on the one side a non-denominational rejection of historic Churches and on the Catholic side a "domestication" of the renewal that plays down its ecumenical dimension and its challenges in favor of a much tamer and non-problematic movement.

So in my next book addressing this issue, *The Glory and the Shame* (1994), I included a chapter on "Unity in the Heavens"¹. This was deeper theologically than the earlier book, and I cite a key passage here: "The unity of the Church is supremely in heaven,

¹ Ch. 10, pp. 84 - 88.

because it is the unity of Christ and those inserted into his life. ... The unity of the Church is not first of all something put together on earth, even though effected by the power of the Holy Spirit. It is established in heaven, because it is totally founded in the ascended Christ. ... But understanding the heavenly dimension of the Christian life shows that we are 100 per cent united in heaven, and the united/divided percentages only apply on earth. In this perspective, the ecumenical task is to realize the existing heavenly unity more and more on earth: 'Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.'"² It is the grace of being baptized in the Holy Spirit poured out by the risen ascended Jesus that effectively introduces us to the heavenly dimension, as we begin to hear the voice of the Lord and are lifted up to him in praise.

Building toward a Reconciliation of Churches not just of Individuals

It was also in *The Glory and the Shame* that I first addressed directly the shame in our histories as churches and the shame within the Pentecostal and charismatic movements (to this second aspect I will return in my third talk). Here I spoke of the pivotal role of Israel and the Jewish people for Christian reconciliation. I moved from the prophetic calls to repentance for ourselves and for our fathers in the Old Testament: "we and our fathers have sinned" (Jer. 3: 25) to the Christian need to learn from the Old Testament model. Here we touch on an aspect that will be developed more in my second talk. But the Jewish Scriptures (in effect the New Testament as well as the Old) are remarkable in the way they do nothing to hide the sins of their heroes - Jeremiah denounces the sins of kings, priests and prophets - so that the biblical histories are completely lacking in the triumphalism that has characterized much Christian and national histories. In the New Testament, the faults and unbelief of the disciples are constantly exposed, the sinful behavior in the church of Corinth is described in some detail and the messages to the churches of Asia Minor are far from being just praise and commendation.

In fact, the aspect of confessing the sin in all our divisions has been weak in the great expansion of ecumenical dialogues between the Churches. Charismatic Christians with some exceptions that I will mention in a moment have tended to focus on the consolations of the Holy Spirit, sometimes only the feel-good factor, and have not been noted for grappling with the sin in our churches from the standpoint of Jeremiah and of Jesus, that is of total identification. This brings us to the theme of the Church as the bride of Christ. For in Ephesians 5, the apostle speaks of Christ loving the church as his bride "that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the **washing of water with the word** that the church might be presented before him in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish." (Eph. 5: 26 - 27). The tasking of cleansing the Church is fundamental to the preparation of the bride for the wedding feast of the Lamb.

It was the year after *The Glory and the Shame* came out that John Paul II issued his encyclical letter on Christian unity, *Ut Unum Sint* (1995). Here the Pope called for a Catholic confession of the sins of history, especially of the second millennium, marked by many divisions, putting in first place sins against unity. This did lead in the year 2000 to some public Catholic confessions of the sins of the past, but at a very general level. It has been among charismatic Evangelicals especially from the new charismatic churches that reconciliation initiatives have sprung up in the last 25 years based on a confession of a history of sin and oppression. Prayer journeys were initiated, e.g. to the slave ports of West Africa, to the 13 old colonies in eastern United States, to northern Ireland, to the tribal areas of Australian aborigines and New Zealand Maoris. These initiatives were

² Ibid., pp. 85 - 86.

accompanied by teaching on identificational repentance, the terminology used by John Dawson, a prominent promoter of reconciliation. But these Evangelical initiatives were addressing divided peoples and nations, not the divisions between the Churches. This was clearly because Evangelicals lacked a sense of the importance of the historic Churches and thought more of the Church as invisible or its unity as merely spiritual. One exception to this pattern were some mainly Lutheran initiatives in Germany in 1995 to confess the sins of Nazi Germany on the fiftieth anniversary of the end of World War II.

My experience, especially in the initiative Toward Jerusalem Council Two, the subject of my next talk, is that charismatics can hold the key to a breakthrough in confessing the sins of division between Christians. My impression is that most mainline Christians just do not know how to go about confessing the sins of the past. If their only worship is only liturgical or private, then what can be done? At the level of church/denominational leadership, the tendency is to set up a committee. When I have taken part with charismatic brothers and sisters from other traditions in confessing all our sins against unity, we begin by praising the Lord, all together, confessing our general inadequacy and our total need of the guidance of the Holy Spirit as to how to proceed. So we then seek the leading of the Holy Spirit, God's way into this particular history we are addressing. The gift of tongues is of great value here, as it is our main way of expressing deep longings that we find hard to put into words. And the Lord never fails us. It is remarkable what can happen. Often we have found that prophetic words unlock something.

For charismatic Christians to play their full role in breaking up the logjam that blocks ecumenical progress, we have to teach our people not just to be looking for Holy Spirit consolation, to look beyond our own needs to the needs of the whole body of Christ and the whole world. We need to learn to weep in the Spirit, the gift of tears, and not just to laugh in the Spirit. We need to rediscover the full range of biblical prayer, which besides praise, adoration, intercession, and personal confession of sin, includes the prayer of lamentation, as in the Lamentations of Jeremiah, Ps. 74 and Ps. 79. We have enjoyed the immediate spiritual fellowship of being baptized in the Spirit without this spiritual labour or groaning in the Spirit. But if we don't move on from this initial impulse for unity into the hard work of theological and historical study, but also the travail of humble confession and lamentation, our fellowship becomes superficial and we tend to retreat back into our denominational comfort zones. "Hear, O women, the word of the Lord, and let your ear receive the word of his mouth; teach to your daughters a lament, and each to her neighbor a dirge." (Jer. 9: 20).